

This is Not a Wasteland

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Chapter Zero

He leaves you a widow three times, he only comes back to you twice. If you knew this on that first evening, a green smell in the air though spring would not arrive for weeks, that first meeting of your eyes across the yard, you might have done things differently. But you don't. Even you, number one going-places gleaming prodigal girl brain of this no-name beach town, you got no future sight.

That evening you're at a party. Some cousin's ex's uncle's throwing a backyard oysterbake in the lull between two hurricanes. The storms come harder and more frequently these days, with little time to recover in between. People have learned to fit their lives into the slivers of calm, crowd their celebrations into brief respites of still water and clear sky. The sun bails below the bay and leaves a girlie-pink skid on the water. People sway together in knots, putting in big time effort to laugh the darkness off. It feels like a farewell party though you're not sure who's leaving. Maybe nobody or everybody. Maybe all the people in this town exude a certain aura of absence, no matter how long they stick around.

The houses here are mildewed and salt-stained. The high branches of the live oaks and loblolly pines are permanently decorated with flood debris, seaweed and children's bicycles. Most people have light-railed their operations inland in the last two decades. The vacation renters and small time real estate moguls, the misanthropic retirees, the gift shop proprietors and deep-fried restaurateurs. All gone, leaving in their wake unlit neon signs and poorly hung storm shutters that flap and crash in the wind. The people who remain through this are a little battered, a little warped in their own way. Their reasons for staying are notable more for their intensity than their logic. Insurance companies, development companies, social service companies have by now all declared this coastline derelict and withdrawn, and so in order to persist here you need a certain level of desperation or disregard. You need to know how to run your own sump pump and septic system. You need to value the quality of not being found.

From three towns to the south, the news came recently: the final river levees burst and flooded a scraggly stubborn community of six hundred. Of these, four hundred and fifty one made it onto evacuation trains. The others are unaccounted for. You imagine their ghosts, blue-green sylphs, drifting north up the coastline, snagging on the broken billboards of your town, sighing ceaselessly down the shuttered commercial strip. To live on the coast of the Mare Atlantica is to know ghosts in everything. The mist rolling off the encroaching ocean comes in gravid with souls, you feel it when you step out through the screen door, it waits to swallow yours as well. Towns build levees and breakwaters. Towns jack up their administrative buildings and slide them back on rollers. Towns abandon every structure meant to hold them and scurry always inland to find new burrows. But wait, the ocean says. I miss you. If only we could be together again. If only we could touch.

This is not to say that people are self sufficient in a particularly systematic way. Plenty are making do in the aftermath of the great stranding, but plenty did not plan all that well. Plenty are doing their best to blot out the reality of their situation. There is a roaring trade in bathtub alcohol, in stimulants and depressants, in opioids and tinctures and SSRIs. Everybody in this neighborhood likes to insist they're in it for life, but every morning you wake up and the town has grown smaller. Still, there is bravado. There are tenacious holds to the homeplace. (My family has been in this house since we fled the coup in the homeland.) (Is that so? My family has crabbed here for seven generations, since my grandfather was freed in Georgia.) (Oh yeah, well my relations sat on Roanoke rock and watched the ships come in, you know, the ships that broke the world.) There are parties almost every night.

This is what forms your universe, for the first eighteen years of your life. The ass end of history. The crumbling edge of the world. It is all you have ever known.

You can hear the noise of the party from a block down the street. Walking to the back gate you hear a high squawk you can identify as Clemente, your cousin, three drinks in. The raspy cackles of Aunt Ashelay's dominoes partners. A subcranial thump of synth bass, and the barely there crackle of someone opening a blister pack of pills.

You lift the metal latch, and push open the gate.

People in the yard turn to look with expressions of rote curiosity that break into gentle joy when they recognize your face.

“Ofelie! Finally.”

You have spent three hours getting ready, which means you are two hours late. Big foil trays of oysterbake and seafood salad are three-quarters empty, melted cheese hardening around the edges. A man whose t-shirt rides up over his black-bristled belly—your friend Loufraine’s uncle, he owns this house, you think, or at least he’s been living here like he owns it—lurches up to you with a clear plastic punch cup, cubes of whitish strawberry bobbing around a single ice cup.

“Offie! You’re here! I’ll have to make another liquor run.” The *jouissance* of his eyebrows indicates that such a run might be more for his benefit than yours, though you provide a welcome excuse.

You sip lukewarm strawberry rum. “Such a good host, uncle. You think of everything.”

Clemente drifts over to kiss you hello, pauses, staring, fixated on your temple. Checks her makeup in the brown mirror of your flawlessly bald-shaved scalp. (Future girls are always repping the bald coif, haven’t you noticed?) Your lips are painted full and pale like a disc of moon pressed into your face. You are a ten-no-question; you are a damn, girl; you are future-so-clear.

Bodies here sway and slide with the ease of people sunk into familiar, familial languor. Everybody’s already drunk. They lean too heavily on you as they hug hello, coo over your eyeliner. All of this is routine, is ritual, but you love it, no joke, no irony, you don’t stop grinning. Everybody at the party thinks their life will be better with you in it, and your life is better with them thinking so, and you circle the fairy-lit yard kissing and oohing and hand flapping like the world is a needle and your Friday night is the point.

Because for as long as you can remember, you have been the darling of this town. The lost-and-found girl. The changeling, the Moses. The princess waiting to be revealed.

You were three when Ashelay found your body, limp and kelp-swaddled, lodged like an old buoy in the sand at the high-tide mark. Four when she gave up hope of locating any relatives. Five when the

papers from the adoption company came through, formally tagging you with Ashelay's surname, *Ferdinand*, inherited through the German-porteño fugee side of her family. Six when the question of, *But where did I come from?* first pieced itself together in your brain.

Some potential answers the town has pieced together over time:

- Any of the countless, sweltering, overcrowded refugee boats bobbing westward from Bermuda-no-more and the Summer Isles, which tip as often as they make land, scattering your birth family into the sea?

- A repurposed petroleum freighter, carrying laid-off oil workers from the Red Sea to tech ports in Uruguay and Brasil, one of them, somehow, the courier of a child?

- A resettlement boat, bearing the last remnants of Haiti up the coast to Montreal and points north?

It is a game in town to guess your origins. Aunt Ashelay circles her fingers around your wrist, holds your forearm up to hers. You are a shade darker than her Argentine-Teutonic-Senegalese complexion, but there is a golden tone that simmers under the surface of your skin. Your eyes are the pale troubled gray of the horizon line just before a storm. Morocco? guess your neighbors. Cyprus? Amazon? Atlantis? Faerie?

You grow up feeling attended to, mysterious, orphaned and beloved.

Ashelay has two other children, biologically hers. Clemente and Manon. Clemente, four years older than you, takes on having a younger sister with a domme-like glee. This leads to regular storms of screaming, hair-pulling, screeching tears, but also means that you are initiated into every rite of growing up approximately four years early.

You are ten when you sip spiked juice for the first time. Twelve when you learn the words blowjob, fingering, titty fuck. Thirteen when you put the terms into practice. If the adults of the beach town are wild and desperate, its children are feral and hopeless. And you are fifteen when your homeroom teacher asks you to stay behind for a minute, sits patiently through your hissed declaration that she is a fascist bitch with a dusty pussy, and then says, "You scored in the ninety-ninth percentile in every

standard learning assessment subject, Ofelie. I'm going to expect more from you, from now on."

And though in the moment you roll your eyes, inform her that oh yeah, well probably you cheated, no way her lazy lonely dried-out jealous in-land spinster ass would be able to stop you from cheating, and plus you don't even give a fuck about the SLAs anyway, who does she think you are?

Despite all that, later in the night, when you sit on the toilet lid so Clemente can do maintenance on your bald mirror scalp with a bare razor blade, and she gets so excited by a message on her screen that she slips and nicks your temple, you grab her wrist and try to crush her hand bones, partially to distract yourself from the pain but mostly so you can declare: "You be careful with this head, okay? This is a ninety-ninth percentile head, right here. Fucking *guard* it."

"Jesus fuck!" Clemente drops the blade into the sink, tries to squirm out of your grasp. A single tear of blood runs down from the nick to your jaw. You let go her hand in order to wipe it away.

"*Fuck.*" Clemente massages her hand, looks at you with withering disappointment. "You *nerd.*"

In the two years that follow, you are an all-out beast at school. There is no standardized learning metric that can hold you. Your classmates make noises of disgust and befuddlement when you stalk down the halls. Your teachers start to talk about you getting a city visa. Not Chicago, probably, not Bellona, but Madison might be within reach? Or Amber? Richmond?

(Aunt Ashelay throws a Straight A party, to which the neighbors bring as usual an ice chest of oysters, a deep fryer, and three handles of sorghum whiskey.)

The attention only increases your certainty of your own specialness. By the time this party at Loufraine's comes around, you walk differently, with thrown back shoulders and a roll of your hips. Somebody might ask how you can hold such a shine when the whole world seems to be collapsing, when all the greatest edifices of mankind's golden age are covered in creeping black mold, when storms roll in ten months out of the year, but that's a question for people who weren't birthed by the storm. Who didn't learn to walk in the pitch and yaw of the apocalypse. Who didn't gain their sea legs as the water rose and rose.